



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: Richard Pendry
Age: 48
Location: Edward Vinson Farm, Faversham
Size: 500 acres
Type: Soft Fruit

Interviewed by: Katy Sharpe
Date: 11th July 2015

Katy: So could you just tell me about the farm, just generally?

Richard: So the farm in general, we... I came here 9 years ago as a, just as a tractor driver and I was working on a cereal farm, from leaving school, so it was, it was totally different aspect as to, to what I was doing, but I just felt it was time to change. So I came here, and fortunate enough within 6 months, I was then asked to, if I wanted to be the assistant farm manager, which, which I took. And then 4 years ago the farm manager, a South African guy went back to South Africa, and the position just became available, and they offered it to me and of course I took it, within that, comes its challenges and problems as you can imagine on a large farm...we're not the biggest strawberry grower, but we are up there with them. We aim to produce around about 2,200 - 2,300 tons of strawberries a year.

Katy: Ok, and do you supply to many supermarkets?

Richard: All the major supermarkets, yeah, M & S, Tesco's, Waitrose, we are doing a bit with Co-op, and we're, contemplating going with Asda as well, but predominantly we're Tesco's and M & S. M & S is good, it's great of course, because everybody loves M&S. The, the only slight challenge is with M&S is that their quality restrictions are of course a little bit higher, because if you're buying strawberries in M&S you expect a... premium strawberry. So I mean one example, M&S, minimum spec for a strawberry is 28mm, whereas Tesco's is 25mm.

K: Oh wow, that's really quite...

R: and that's a big difference when, when you're, you know there's a lot of strawberries between 25 and 28, and of course the, the pickers or the seasonal staff, they don't measure every berry, that would be impossible. So, they kind of get the



feeling for it. Rather than putting anything that they're not sure of, of course it gets rejected, in the field. So when you're picking for M&S, your waste percentage does go probably 10% higher than when you're picking for Tesco's. Now, you can argue is that right or wrong, is that good and bad, I, I don't...the answer I don't know. We don't get paid a lot more from M&S, but of course we're, we're...it's good to be supplying M&S, so... I suppose, you know, I suppose in the long run it all works itself out, we get a little bit more, but their specs are higher. M&S is M&S, they always have been a good, a "good" shop for, for whatever you wanted to buy. So, we're now 70% of our production...so going back to when I came, we, the- these are called tabletops [*points to rows of strawberries, as we've arrived at the field*], which is a tabletop growing system, 1.2 metres above the ground, and these are all grown in Coir, substrate, so it's all come from Sri Lanka, as a compacted slab of coconut fill. So when I came we were growing all the strawberries in the soil, still, traditional, traditional ways, we have one field left - which is this one - and what they have done the industry have banned the use of sterilisation products, so we can't sterilise the soil anymore now, so it's driving... it's driven people out of soil production. You can't plant in the soil unless you sterilise, because basically the plants die, they suffer from wilt, and they die so straight away you're not....

K: Is that just strawberries, or is that common with most plants?

R: It's common with most plants, but strawberries...when I, [laughs] where I used to work, I used to look over the fence and think "Oh growing strawberries looks quite easy" you just plant them, water 'em, and eat them! You know and job's done, yeah! [laughs], It's not, it's a... it's a science to growing strawberries, far, far more than I expected... So this is our last field of strawberries in the soil.

K: So, how come you've decided to keep this one in the soil?

R: This, this is 2 years old now. It's over-wintered, so we, we could sterilise 2 years ago, was the last year of sterilisation, so we sterilised this field, we hedged our bets and run it for another year. It's ok, you can start to see some of the plants starting to suffer now, and the more load that they get, they're just starting to come back. That's just, so you can just see a little hint of white flower, which means the new trusses are coming now, and when they come under stress, either temperature or, or growing stress, that's when they start to die. And there's a few just showing up now, there's a few in that line there. They're just starting to die, so commercially you can't plant in the soil anymore, which, which headed us and the industry into finding something else. So Coir is the next...the best alternative.

K: so is Coir only really becoming ...how prevalent, I mean....



R: the last, the last 3 or 4 years, definitely, the last two years. I mean next year we will be 100% Coir production, substrate. [points to plants] So it's all in a bag, it's all in a one metre bag, so these are all shipped from Sri Lanka.

K: is that quite costly? Having it shipped over?

R: It costs per metre, so they come in a 1 metre bag and that, that contains 18 litres of Coir once it's rehydrated, and each bag costs...depending on the supplier, anything between £1.20 or £1.30 per bag.

K: I'm about to sneeze....sorry... no it's ok [laughs]

R: [laughs] delivered.

K: Ahh. And how..how...like.. would a metre cover, what, one of those rows or less than that, or?

R: No, I'll show you.

K: Alright

R: Let's have a look

[Both get out of the car]

K: Mmm it smells nice...

R: so that's, that's one metre slab. So that, that bag there will have cost you £1.30. so it's a lot...it's a lot when you're thinking in this field alone there's 21,000 bags.

K: Yeah, in just, in what, in this whole tunnel or the whole field?

R: No, sin in, sorry, this is a three hectare field, so in this field, it's 21,000 bags, so that's 21,000 pounds just on buying the bag

K: and just on this field, and not having the other fields

R: Just on this field. So this is 3 hectares out of 80. So, when, when you know you wonder... we wonder how we can make money [laughs] because a roll of plastic, 800 metre roll would do about 4 of these tunnels. That's 2,000 pounds. So, it's it's...to change to this method of growing is a huge expense, but it's the only way forward. The, the joy of this, this is tabletop production, so the joy of this, is...the, the pickers...staff are much much happier, because - you and I would be the same - if



you're picking strawberries like this [demonstrates picking off the bench], you can do it all day. When you're bent over in that field there, by about lunchtime your back aches, it's hot, you slow down, so production drops right off. They, they maintain a good picking rate, it's a piece-work rate, well it's a, it's a rate on a target. Of course we have to set a target otherwise people would be going at their own pace, [laughs], which is fine, but we won't make any money.

K: what sorts of targets do people...

R: It depends on the field and the crop. This is a good pick here as you can see, we've got a good pick here, so they would be expected to be picking round about 4... round about 18 - 20 kilos an hour. That would then be based on, around abouts £7.00 an hour. Our good pickers are picking...are earning 10 pounds an hour, and our average pay is about, we pay around about, it turns out, about 7.50 to 7.70 an hour average. So everyone makes, we have to make the money up anyway to minimum wage, 6.50, so everyone makes 6.50, the good ones are 10, but the percentage are earning you know, round about 7.70, which is...it's hard work, I won't take it away from any of them. They're all Eastern European, our staff, sort of 65% Bulgarian, 30% Romanian, a few Russian, few Latvian. But they work very, very hard. And, you know, you hear these stories that they're coming to take our work, [laughs] they're not at all because we, we probably have one or two English people apply a year, and they probably last one or two days. We start picking half past 4 in the mornings, when it's hot, and we're fair but firm, and we have to be, we're a business, after all. So, and they just don't want to do it. They don't want to pick strawberries, they wanna pick them for about an hour, and they eat more than what they pick, and then, and they don't meet the target, so... we have a target system, where we train people, and we, we build that up over 4 days, and we try, try to..inc- because not everyone's a picker, you know, you or I, you might be very good, I might be very bad, people are all different, you know we don't expect everybody to be a robot, so if, if they can't make it, we try and send them into a raspberry gang or a blueberry gang or something, because they might be better at blueberries, and they just might not be strawberry pickers so...But ultimately at some point, if they can't make the grade, and we haven't got any work elsewhere on the farm, then we ask them to leave of course. But they, by that time they, they've done that anyway, because they know that they, they haven't, it's just not a job for them. We get about 60, 65% returnees each year, and that's a good number, we don't really want any more than that, because you need new people to keep, keep it fresh. Otherwise, people, and I'm sure I'm the same, once you've been there for such a long time, you do get complacent. The good thing about returnees, is, they know us, they know the farm, they know the system and they know what we do.

K: Yeah, so it saves time training them



R: Exactly. So, and, and if they want to come back it means we're doing something right.

K: Yeah, yeah.

R: because it is hard work, it is hard work, you know, we're under these polytunnels, we had some extreme temperatures, couple of weeks ago, 38 degrees outside so we were in at 4 picking, we stopped picking about half past 10, the guys all went back to their, their, accommodation, and then come back 6 o'clock in the evening and then picked again. 1) you can't pick strawberries when it's too hot, because they're jam, and 2) it's just too much for the guys. You know, it's, we don't want to be a prison camp, you know we, we, we, we expect a lot from them and, and they're very good, they, they're very hard working and do very well for us. And you know, so we, we try and look after them as much as possible, try and pay them as much as possible, but of course you know, we, we've got to make money as well.

K: Yeah, yeah and if your other costs are also quite high

R: Well...it, it's crazy, when you think you know you're spending £1.30 per metre, so we're spending as a company, quarter of a million pounds every year on Coya. We, we expect these bags to last at least 2 years, hopefully three years and then we turn them around, replace them. We recycle the Coya, we recycle the plastic, and then start all over again. Er, anything more than three years, your production drops down. Year one is great, so if, if this was a year one bag, you would expect a kilo per plant, and there's 6 plants a metre here. Year 2, you would average around 900g a plant, year 3, 750 – 800. So, it drops off every year and that's because the Coya, you take the goodness out of the Coya... and, and it stops being able to breathe, so the plants need, need to be able to grow and breathe, the roots need to be, be able to grow, so the older the bag, the more difficult it gets for that because you're taking all the goodness out of it.

K: Ok. Do you feed them? I've noticed these sort of tubes,

R: Yes, yeah,

K: is that how you...

R: it's all irrigation fed, it's all drip fed, and that's done from a tank in the yard and it's just pumped all the way round the farm. And it's got its own feed recipe: nitrogen, calcium, manganese, iron, boron, far more than when I used to look and think "well they just water them" it's far, far more than that! So you know, we, we, we think we're doing it right, it comes with a lot of challenges growing soft fruit, of course it's shelf life is the biggest one, it's not something like an apple that you can



say "Ok well we'll leave it and pick it next week", because it'll sit there. This won't. These are ready to pick today and if we don't pick them today after a hot day like today, they'll be dark red tomorrow.

K: Like that one?

R: Yeah, I mean that one was missed, they they....that's

K: Is that too small though?

R: Yeah, well that's dead, that one's shrivelled up, but that should have been took, took away last time

K: So, so when we were talking about sizes, in term- when you said 25, 28, so is that, what is that around, is that the circumference of the strawberry

R: Yes, yeah The team leaders, have actually got gauges with them and they randomly check, but all of those would go M&S, [pointing], that one would, so straight away you can see that that's probably just over 25, just... that one maybe not. So that one, if we're picking for M&S today in here, you'd pick them two, and you'd drop that one. Not drop it, but you'd throw it into a waste bin. And this, that's the difficulty when you're picking because, if you was just picking every strawberry, it'd be perfect, they could pick every red strawberry, pick pick pick pick pick, and when they get to a clump like that - ok, we're M&S, so they can't measure every berry, they would pick that one for M&S, and they would pick and drop, or pick and...these go into a juice bin, so it's not, we're not wasting it, it all goes off for jam, or puree. But, ultimately if you were picking for Tesco's, they would go, and that one wouldn't so suddenly a lot of...2 berries you know 2 3 4 berries here and there, again, that one you'd pick, that one you wouldn't, so...

K: So who'd you send it to for jams? Is that, other, other companies or is that...?

R: Yes, yeah yeah, it goes to a local company in Sittingbourne and they puree it for jam, or for juice, some of it goes to smoothies, we just needed an outlet for, we call it waste fruit - it's not waste and it's such a...for us it is, for our supermarkets it is, but it is such a shame, and that's because... [picks up a strawberry], these are the sweetest tasting berries

K: the little ones?

R: yeah, so many kids at school. You know, there is a baby berry production line, but it's not really financially working, but there is a baby berry, but, but these...



K: by that you mean, the, what you just grow the small ones?

R: Yeah, the small ones, you know I mean I keep saying that the...

K: I think they're nice, I think they kind of look quite cute in a way [laughs]

R: Yeah, I mean if you had a bowl of ice cream, and put a circle of those around them, They would be lovely, you'd pay £10 in a restaurant for that. But, unfortunately supermarkets don't want them.

K: No....it's a shame

R: So, you know, it is a shame, the reason why and, and it's, it's exaggerated now at this time of year, it's the hot weather. They, basically they ripen too quickly, when it's too hot they ripen too quickly.

K: Without growing...

R: Without growing. If it's cold, cloudy, miserable, all your strawberries would be like that [points to large strawberry], because they have time to, they have time to grow before they ripen. When it's hot as it has been, especially with the warm nights as well, they ripen too quickly. Some of it's down to variety as well, because some varieties are different, but yeah so [water starts coming into the plants], they're watering these now.

K: Is that all automatic or does someone have to...?

R: Yes, no, it's all automatic. But the problem, we, we...everything's automated of course but we still have guys checking, because no matter what kind of equipment you've got, whether it's state of the art, and it's doing it for 3 minutes per run, that's fine, but if one line was blocked, this line, if this irrigation line didn't open for whatever reason, by the end of the day these would be dead.

K: really?

R: it's as quick as that. Yeah, yep yeah you start to see them go and they all drop and then they don't come back. You can rescue them a little bit, but, they don't like to be dried out

K: I didn't know that at all, that's...that's quite shocking, yeah

R: Nope they don't, they don't like to be dried out. I mean this, we run round about 60% moisture content in these bags,



K: Quite high yeah...

R: drop down 40% and the plants will start to suffer. If it's too wet, the plants will start to suffer, the leaves will go yellow, so we, we try and hold it round about 60% and the guys have got meters, basically you can test them as you go round. They know roughly how many cycles, on a day like today, they would...5 or 6 cycles, on a day like today will hold this around about 60%. And that's fine, water them this morning, if the bags are a bit too wet this morning, it's not a problem cause they know it's gonna use it today. So...

K: so does each cycle last...when it's putting the water in, how long does that last?

R: It depends on, on how much they're trying to put in and how wet the bag was before they start, but each cycle will last round about 40, 45 seconds. Sometimes a bit longer, sometimes a bit less... so, I mean this field looks well, not only do we have our pests and diseases to worry about, I mean strawberry plants like mildew, detritus, they like just about everything you can, they can get. So it's a constant battle to try and keep on top of everything

K: Cause are you...do you use pesticides or are you not allowed?

R: We do use pesticides,

K: You do

R: of course, we have to. We used to grow blackcurrants organically but commercially.....you can't

K: It's just not viable really?

R: It's just not viable. You know, it, on the scale that we are, we have to, we have to use pesticides...we do use a lot of biological control, we try not to use pesticides but of course we have to maintain it... [points towards bran on the plant] this is biological control this is bran, so these are predators that we put out, and these predators, they will eat the the spider, there's a little pest called a spider mite, and we have frips, these are pollen beetles, that you can see they don't do us any harm. But there is a, a little insect that's a frip, that will eat the, the flower and it distorts it so it distorts the berry, so we have to throw the berry away. So, aphids are a big problem, so we put a lot of biological control out, and this is introduced,pots...

K: So did you say that was bran, sorry?



R: that's bran, that's what the predators live on, until they get established

K: oh right, so they do that and then...

R: Yeah

K: so the predators sorry, the predators are the ones that will eat the spider-mite?

R: Yes

K: What was the name of the predator, sorry I didn't....

R: there's a lot, Phytosilious or *Amblyselious*,so these...[walks over to an upturned bottle of them] these come from either Italy, or Holland, so this is, [laughs at the picture], looks a little bit - it's not that size so there's 10,000 in here, er of phytosilius, and these will eat, you won't be able to see them with the naked eye, you might be able to see...

K: Oh yeah, is it those...

R: a little bit of movement, maybe. Yeah they're very very small, so these are tipped on top, and then they just move around the plant, and... I'll try and find a leaf with a spider on... [wanders down the row] Here you are. We're, we're quite lucky and we've introduced quite a lot, but you can just see on there - possibly - a little bit of webbing round the outside.

K: Oh yeah

R: and that's the spider, so that spider, what that'll do that'll distort the leaf, and basically the plant switches off, and the plant eventually will die, and it will red- it just takes all the goodness out of the growing part of the leaf, so we, we introduce all of the phytoseiulus to eat the spider...and they do.

K: Is the spider quite tiny, because they're really tiny...

R: Very small, yeah I've got a lens there that you'd be able to see them in, if you wanna have a look

K: Yeah, it'd be interesting

R: But we, we put a lot of biological control out, we don't like using chemicals. We're well aware it's not good, it's not ideal, but, I mean, we, we plant this crop in the end



of February, so we start picking it early May, we still want to be picking this in the end of October, so it's a long time on this variety, you know this is an Ever-bearer, it's a long time. We have to keep this crop going, and we have to keep it clean. Clean of mildew, clean of petritus, clean of pests and diseases. So our IPM is very high.

K: IPM?

R: It's pest management...So, I mean, the-there's one example of what a spider will do if it gets a little bit established. There's another little bit of webbing there, there's another little bit.

K: This is interesting, because it makes me think, you know, maybe we have these in my garden at home

R: Oh yeah, I'm sure

K: Probably do...

R: Yeah...So...and it's just the webbing on there [points], but....say it's a good one it's not that good [laughs] because of the webbing.

K: Ohh

R: I'll get the lens [starts to walk back to the car] I'm sure we can see some...

K: That's really interesting, so it, so it, it, blocks, does it sort of prevent the plant from photosynthesising or something?

R: Yes it does, yes, yeah, so it's not...like I said, it was so easy looking over the fence and going "Ahh they're growing strawberries here,

K: Yeah! [laughs]

R: it must be so easy" [both laugh]

K: And I suppose, I don't know, is it just an old... the name strawberries...do they...traditionally, like, grow in...straw....? Is that where the name came from

R: er initially, and that one field's left, we, we lay the straw down there, it's an old thing isn't it, you put straw down, and it was a berry on straw. So you always put the straw down, to protect the berry from laying on the soil, so years ago that's where it was a strawberry.



K: Oh so it doesn't...ok

R: it was in the straw, you know so. We aim to be, we're 60, 65% tabletop production, we have got a system which we call bags on beds, so we have a raised bed and then we put a bag on the top, the reason for that is we force them, we plant them in January and force them to cover them with fleece, to warm them up, and the lower to, the closer to the ground the warmer they, it is, so you're about a week or so earlier than what we could be... two, two weeks earlier than what we could be here, and two weeks early on English strawberries is very good, because the supermarkets love...they've had Spanish strawberries all winter s-, if you can start producing early English strawberries, sometime mid-April, price is very good, and early, early fruit for us is wonderful, when everyone starts picking strawberries of course the price drops, it can range anything from 6 pounds a kilo - early - to 2.70 when everyone's picking them, and yet our costs remain the same. You need to be, I suspect, round about 3 pounds a kilo to make any money. So of course you can have good or bad years, so this, this was a very good growing spring, but this hot weather, doesn't, they don't like it, the strawberries don't like it, they, the ever-berries they switch off, if gets too warm, the trusses that are in the ground just stop producing. It's nature's way of saying it's too hot, lets save ourselves, and not have anymore babies, as it were. So they switch off, but it needs to be, those couple of days of 38 degrees, it- they're not too bad, it's the night temperatures as well, it's when it's over 20, 20, 25 degrees constant for 5 or 6 days. We don't think we quite had that. You can... the young trusses are still coming, so we think we're gonna be ok.

K: And does the weather affect any of the other fruits? Like the blueberries...

R: Yes, yeah we had - and I can show you on the way out - blackcurrants, we had potentially a very good crop, and you'll see them when we go by, they aborted, in that hot weather; they basically, they cooked themselves, and baked, and they aborted, and over a course of 2 days, our crop just dropped off. Physically it was dropping off, so we had to start picking. The factory doesn't open until...didn't open until this Wednesday, they all go to Ribena, as in the Ribena drink, so the factory wasn't going to be opening until Wednesday but we had to start picking on the Sunday, because quite literally the crop would have come off by Wednesday. So we, took it off, froze...put it in the cold store and froze it. That's fine now, but we've lost, our early variety, we've lost, lost probably 40% of our crop, I suspect.

K: So has this farm, did you say it's always grown fruit, or at least since you've been here?

R: Yes, yeah it used to be top fruit as well, as in apples and pears but that was before my time. so they came away from that now.



K: Do you think that's...cause the last farmer I went to was also a soft fruit, is that something that's quite...is it easier for you as a farmer to grow soft fruit and make more money from that than it is from tabletop?

R: Soft fruit, soft fruit is a good enterprise. I don't know much about top fruit, apples and pears to be honest. But I know financially soft fruit is a better crop to grow. The risks on top fruit are lower, because you, you don't have many pests and diseases, it's shelf life is much, much longer, so if we didn't get to pick an apple today, it wouldn't really matter because you can pick it tomorrow or Monday. If you didn't pick a strawberry today, it wouldn't be worth picking tomorrow.

K: How many teams...I know you said there's about 400 seasonal staff, is that split into, what, some people do strawberries, some people do...

R: Yep, yeah, yep yep we've got one raspberry gang... [looking through lense on a leaf].. I can't find any live spider, unfortunately our pests, our predators have eaten them

[both laugh]

K: that's a good thing!

R: [laughs] which is good, yeah [both laugh]. Yeah we have, we have one blueberry gang, that only pick blueberries, because the people get, trained, almost, we train them but they also train themselves, to... so, a raspberry picker. A raspberry picker may not be able to pick strawberries, and a strawberry picker may not be a good raspberry picker. So, we soon work them out, who, who can, can't pick. So we have a raspberry gang, now we're not picking raspberries all, all season of course, so those guys will go off doing other husbandry jobs. By husbandry jobs I mean weeding, runner cutting...these strawberries will keep producing runners as in a runner – can't see any here because we've just de-runnered these – basically, it's producing plants

K: and not strawberries.

R: erm... and not strawberries, exactly [laughs], so you have to remove the runners. [laughs] So yeah in this gang...[coughs] so we're picking strawberries

K: how many are there in a gang?

R: In this, in, in the real peak, and we, we expect to peak on about 180 tonnes a week for two or three weeks which has just gone, we would have about 5 gangs, with



about 70, 65, 70 pickers. Then they would have two field assistants and a team leader. You could see the girl in bright orange, she's the team leader, so she's in charge of that gang. She'll monitor their performance, she has two field assistants, so they will they, they're kind of answerable to her, and they're checking people's quality, if they're picking right, if they're picking up, up to speed, up to spec, and and then the team leader's responsible to, to the harvest manager.

K: So there's kind of quite an organ-...like a sort of hier- not hierarchy, but you know, you've got distinct....

R: Er... yeah, there's a family tree kind of, you know, and, I, I believe we're all equal and these guys are as good as any one of us and without them we wouldn't be here.

K: Yeah, there wouldn't be strawberries would there.

R: No, there would not be a soft fruit farm in this country without Eastern Europe. No doubt about that. People's perception, of, of years ago....I think health and safety probably killed it a little bit, because you always used to have the mums with the children picking strawberries, and the kids were running up and down the field and...not allowed anymore. So those days are long gone now, you know, the, the families where the wife and children used to come out strawberry picking doesn't happen anymore.

K: Yeah, and I suppose maybe also, is it where you've had to be then, become...sort of become more specific with the strawberries... you can't just pick every one.

R: No, no... and, and I think, of course.....what, what has initially aided us, is, is the low pay in Eastern Europe, it, it is attractive. It's, you know, working in the UK is attractive to Eastern Europe. these guys are honest, they will tell you that, in Eastern Europe they'll earn £12 a day, and that's a good, you know it's quite good, anything between 7 and 12 pounds a day, and they'll earn that an hour, so....you can understand why they want to come to Europ- er to, to the UK, and, and I for one think it's wonderful that they do.

K: Yeah, I think, wh- I- it could al- I think, also it could be you know when you said how the English, or whatever, the British people that came to pick, they.....[thinks] for us obviously, 7 pounds an hour isn't as...you know...[attractive] attractive so they'll be thinking, "Oh I want a career", they'll be seeing something like this, as just a side-job, or you know, so they won't actually re-...may not have the care that the others may have, probably have.

R: Exactly. And these guys, they're saving for their studying, for their, they send money back for their parents, because..... olden Eastern Europe, so their, these guys'



parents, they've not got much, you know they've struggled and they'll honestly tell you. so they're working and they're sending money back for their parents, for their families, they're saving money for their studying, and they're, they're not wasting it on...beer...[laughs]

K: [laughs] like certain other people

R: And pizza.... [both laugh] Erm.... and I admire them for that, T- t-, there's not many UK families that would think about their parents struggling. I mean, my partner's from Bulgaria, and she summed it up, saying that her parents, gave and done everything for her and her two brothers, and sacrificed you know, a lot, for their children. She said, so it's a small price to...to, se- well..and we send back money er, for them, just to make their life a little bit more comfortable. Because it is, and I've been to Bulgaria a couple of times.... it is a different world. It's, you know... I don't know if you've ever been to...

K: I haven't, no.

R: You can go to the holiday side of Bulgaria and it's wonderful, but if you go to real life Bulgaria, it's an eye opener

K: That's the case for most places really, isn't it?

R: It is- exactly, and it's not just there, and you can do that in the UK as well, but it as re- as regards you know, why these guys want to come, you can see it, you can understand it,

K: Definitely

R: And, and it, thank god they do. Because, we couldn't do it, we employ nearly 400 on here, our neighbours employ 250, our other neighbours employ nearly 1000, so suddenly we're employing 2000 people straight away, and... it, it's a shame for their own countries, because they're losing that...there's a generation now, that, there's the older generation who...have got no choice to stay where they are. The, the younger ones that have got a bit of drive, and a bit of in- incentive, they're all over here. Italy, Germany, France, not just here, they've, they've sl- you know, they're they're ma- they're trying to make a better life for themselves, because their own...and that, that's where, well mainly in Bulgaria in particular, they're going to suffer because they're losing that generation, of 25-40 year olds that, that are leaving their own countries to make a better life elsewhere. So they're gonna, that's gonna catch up with them at some point.

K: Especially if, well, when the older generation die



R: Exactly, yes, yeah, yep, so it, it's very you know, people can very easily judge eastern European staff, but there's a lot more to it, and yeah if they're prepared to come and do the hard work, good on them.

K: Yeah, I'd say definitely, it's more about, it's almost about the person, I think... Cause one of my, my friend Jess, she she does a lot of, [sighs, wondering how to phrase this] she doesn't.... she works on farms abroad, so she, she's just, she's one of those kind of people that travels a lot. And is very kind of... hippy. So she's, she worked in Turkey, last summer on a farm, picking.....something.... Yeah so I can imagine her, she'd probably be... it's people like that are probably the people that would be, would be ok with working here, but the majority of people aren't like that. The majority of people get used to thinking....you know, [starts thinking about wider society] it kind of gets drummed into them at school, you know, they think school, career, blah blah blah...You don't....I dunno... I dunno.....It's all very black and white I suppose...

R: Yeah...it's...soft, soft fruit farming, any, any farming, you're...it's difficult, because there's, the, the one aspect we can't control is the weather, and we can do as much as we can with the tunnels by preventing it, it...ev- you have to grow under protection, we, we, physically you couldn't grow a commercial crop, without...so we have to grow under protection, and er...it's the only way to get quality fruit. But its, it, it certainly comes with its challenges. It really does. These raspberries that you see now, these were early planted, we planted these in January, for the early market. They're just coming to the end now, as you can see they're tired. They're looking a little bit tired, they've cropped well so far. It's our first year back into raspberries so we're learning a little bit again about er, how to grow them properly. These ones were planted in in March, so these are just coming now, and we're quite optimistic, that we've got a good crop there. Er..Good, good crop coming.

K: So when they come, to the end of, you know when they're tired, and they're finished, do you have to go down the rows, pull them out?

R: yes, we grub them and then start again next year, yeah we don't over winter any er, we, we did overwinter some strawberries, but we won't do that again.

K: is that where you keep the plant in and just hope it grows...

R: Yes, yeah, yeah it's when you just leave it, yeah. It, it and it will grow and it will do something, but again commercially, when you budget, you budget on the figure per plant, and you need to reach that, and on an overwintered plant, it becomes a gamble.

K: so in the winter, how do you make money?



R: We don't

K: you don't?

R: No. It's, it's quite simple as that, you know we stop selling fruit at the end of October beginning of November, [coughs] so of course you get your cheque a little while after that, but then it's payout, payout, payout, payout, we don't get no money back until May. So er, of course that's fine because, it's a big picture, so you know that's gonna happen, but from, from November onwards we just pay out. We haven't got many seasonal staff then of course, most of them, by the end of August, September our yields will drop off, and they've been here now, cause there's no restrictions now, so they used to be only able to stay 6 months a year, so we had to recruit right the way through the year. Now, they can stay indefinitely. But they don't, once they've done their 6, 7 months, two reasons, one, they, they all get a little homesick of course, and two, they've earnt enough money now to go home for 5 months and not work...so and they're tired, you know it's a difficult job, it's it's, you know it's 6 days a week, and they're up at half past, well they're working at half past 4, so they're up at half past 3 4 o'clock, and yeah it's all well and good they finish at 2 or something, but you can't sleep in the afternoon, and, and you can't, it's no good going to bed at 6... a lot of them they go to bed at 8 o'clock at night because they've got to get back up again. a lot of that doesn't get seen, you know, we're, we're... I, and, and I know I speak for the company, we're lucky to have them, because we certainly wouldn't be where we are without them. So, so raspberries, we're expecting, raspberries are a good crop to grow, we're, we're variety bound on what we can and can't grow, different varieties for different growing groups, so we've now found this variety...Edward Vinson is not only a commercial farm, it's a propagator, so we propagate our own plants, and it's also, it's got its own breeding programme. So, and that is intense, that is, you go down the roots of taking DNA, and all things. To produce the ultimate berry. Not there yet of course, but so ultimate berry is shape size, taste texture, shelf life.

K: So are you involved in that side?

R: No, no, no, no, that's er...I'm not involved with the propagation, only other than, than, it, it's a sister company so we do get involved. The breeding is a sister company, but it's way too intense, you know we've got enough to worry about on the farm, so so we've now, within our growing group we've now got this variety that we believe can contend with the others, that's why we're back into raspberries and it does seem to be working. Raspberries are good, 8 pounds a kilo.

K: Do you supply them to Tesco and M&S as well?



R: Yes, we're picking at the moment, raspberries only for M&S, because they're a lovely raspberry, they're nice shape, nice size, so at the moment we're picking purely M&S.

K: Is that nationwide or do you, is it just Kent?

R: Er, nationwide

K: do you know how much percentage?

R: Er, no, to be honest I don't know, and the very odd thing with it, is that we're going to our local Tescos in Faversham and there's strawberries from Scotland, and you think...well how does that, how does that happen? You know, ours are going to Scotland, or to the Midlands, or Birmingham or somewhere, and someone's paying for that, that logistics

K: Yeah, I mean sometimes I see some from Kent, but... I dunno.

R: Yeah, a lot, a lot come down from Scotland, from Ross Mitchell, you'll see his name quite a lot, er Paul Hunter's... and you wonder why, when we're 5 minutes away from, from two Tescos, 10 minutes that way, 5 minutes that way, surely it's better to run them there. Someone then makes

K: unless, unless it goes to some big warehouse

R: well it goes, yeah and then they ship it out

K: and then they don't really look at the name...

R: No.

K: Sad really

R: But it still doesn't make sense because someone's paying for that. So...is that the housewife? Or is that the grower? but someone's paying for that to be driven all all round the country. Whereas surely if you can move it from here to there, your costs should be lower, so someone should make a little bit more money or the price comes down a little bit.

K: It's odd...



R: I'm not quite sure why that...we're never stop that, that's gonna to be until the end of the world...why they move it round, end of time why they manage to move fruit all around the country.

K: And is that just Tesco, have you seen your fruit in M&S, or..?

R: Yeah, yeah we do, but again, it gets moved around as well, because we, we pack our own, we've got our own packhouse as well, so we know where the fruit's going. And it's going up north and you know, they pack for different depots, and you think why? Why are we packing for a depot that's 200 miles away? They've got crop there.

K: So who instructs... like is there someone above you that tells...

R: Berry world. Marketing is done by Berry world. So we, we submit an estimate to Berryworld. I, every Friday I'll submit a three week estimate of what we anticipate to pick, of course it's an estimate cause I don't, the weather does change it a lot, comes out hot and sunny everything comes quickly, cold and cloudy, everything slows down. So it's a three week estimate, so I'll submit a three week estimate to Berryworld, and then they sell the fruit depending upon what we estimate we're going to...going to pick. And they sell it to where they believe it needs to be.

K: So they're the ones that sell it to supermarkets

R: They're the ones that sell it yeah

K: So they're the ones

R: Yeah, yeah we don't do direct sales so...

K: Ok. So you need to have a word with them about getting your fruit [laughs]

R: [laughs] exactly about why are you doing that? So you can see just here, this is a young blackcurrant field, this is only 4 years old now. All of those currants were hanging on the bush lovely until last Friday. Last Friday morning there was one or two dropping off, and this is following on from those 2 or 3 days of 38 degrees. Last Friday evening when I walked round, I saw that, so I thought, well we've got to pick them, so we did pick them, but, we, we picked probably 60% of what we could've done.

K: Yeah, because I can still see, well I can see some on the plant

R: There's still a few that wouldn't come but that's because they weren't quite ready to go, but the rest were falling off, so we had to make a decision and the decision



was to pick them. We picked them on the Sunday, because we would have lost a lot more. So it's a shame, what was looking like a very good blackcurrant year, and for a ton of blackcurrants it's worth about 700 pounds, and you would average round about on a good year, between 5 and 7 tons a hectare. They're quite a cheap crop to grow actually, once they're in they're in you know we don't irrigate the blackcurrants, we just we, we spray them 3 or 4 times a year for different reasons, and so they're quite a good crop to grow. ... So unfortunately what, what looked like being a fairly good blackcurrant year, and we hoped to pick round about 150 tons of blackcurrants in a year, we're not, we, I suspect now, we're going to end up round about 120, probably.

K: and does that, I mean....does the supplier, does Tes- whoever it is...do they...

R: These will go to Ribena. LRS is the company – it's Lucozade now, it used to be GSK – GlaxoSmithKline.

K: So what fruit do you sell to who sorry? So you sell the strawberries and raspberries to M&S and Tesco...

R: and blueberries

K: and blueberries, and blackcurrants

R: blackcurrants, all to Ribena. Yes, yeah. So what looked like being a good blackcurrant year, is not going to be now. Strawberries, at the moment, are doing somewhere where they need to be. Of course could be a little bit higher [laughs] And blueberries seem to be ok, yields seem to be somewhere, somewhere where we want them to be. So we seem to be doing about right at the moment. But for us, you know, it's changing every year, brings different challenges. The, the climate is our biggest challenge, price of course, supermarkets - supermarkets are only going to get stronger, and they do call the shots, which sometimes is a little frustrating but there's nothing you can do about.

K: how, how are they?

R: Well, because on quality for instance. You know, the silly things like if you have a small piece of straw in a punnet of strawberries it's classed as a foreign body...well, years ago if you had a small piece of straw in a, in a in a strawberry punnet you thought it was a good thing, you know, if you had a little bit of mud on a strawberry you'd, you'd brush it off and eat it. You know, those days are gone now and that's driven by, I suspect the housewife wanting the, the perfect berry. There was a little thing on Facebook the other day, it was quite good because it said if you know the link between a stinging nettle and a dock leaf, then then, you're one of the



true guys, or something like that. Because I wonder how many people now, do know the link between a dock leaf and a stinging nettle.

K: I know the link.

R: Yeah, exactly, but there's not many, you know, they'll think what's a dock leaf got to do with a stinging nettle? You know and... every so often, I don't go on Facebook much, but you see these comments like "when I was a boy, I was allowed to climb a tree and I was allowed to get dirty, and [laughs] you know

K: yeah... health and safety's gone a bit... OTT

R: exactly. Yeah yeah, I mean we're bound by...we, we want, we have to do it right, but we wanna do it right, you know we're not just in it for the short term, we're in it for the future, the future's good, the future of soft fruit is good. It does appear you know we will be 100% substrate production. This is, this is how these bags are delivered to us from Sri Lanka [car draws up at crates of the Coya] So these come in in a compressed slab, and it's dried up... it's dried up coconut. [gets out of the car] So that's how it comes to us, dried up coconut husks, and that's all compressed so when you rehydrate it, so you put irrigation drippers in there, you rehydrate it and it rehydrates up to a full bag, which is what we saw up there. So then you just plant into it. But...er this is a tiny, tiny proportion of what we buy, and when you can imagine it, every one of them's 1 pound 30...

K: Yeah - and how thin they are as well, how many's in there!

R: Yeah there's 600 on a pallet, so I mean it, it's a great way to haul it over, but it takes 4 weeks to get from Sri Lanka, and we've, with the industry all having to go substrate, I wonder if Sri Lanka can cope with the demand. They say they can.

K: very small country isn't it?

R: Yeah, I was lucky enough to go out there. Botanicoya flew me out to see how they make it. And yeah it was, lovely, yeah! I was only there for 4 days, didn't get much chance to walk along the beach, but nevertheless it was a very good trip, very interesting to see how it's done. So they're confident that they can keep up with the demand, but it's not just the UK, it's going...it is only the UK that has had the sterilisation in the soil banned, for some reason, England always seems to be the first while the rest of Europe seems to be able to get away with a few things. You know every week we have a pesticide update of what we can and can't use. And every week we get more restrictions, they either change the harvest interval date, or the amount of litres per hectare you can use in a year. But it does appear that some of Europe doesn't seem to get the same restrictions that we do, I don't know why.



K: how do they regulate those restrictions? Is it..Who is it, if it comes from central government.

R: Yeah it comes from the, obviously the governing body, and we do, we are verily, very heavily inspected, and they're forever carrying out pesticide residue tests, and they request samples, they request traceability of what we've done to the crop from growing, to harvesting, and it, it's random tests, it's not something that you can be prepared for because Tesco will turn up at the packhouse unannounced, and they'll say right ok, so we'll choose this field, I want full traceability from, from planting to today, and that's full traceability of what we've done to the plant, the crop, what we sprayed, what we've applied, fertilisers, when we picked it and then they cross check that against all of our spraying records, to make sure it's all been picked when it should have done. Again, so if we spray the three day harvest interval, at 10 o'clock in the morning, three days later we can't pick it until 10 o'clock three days later. Now if we've gone in and picked it at 9 o'clock, straight away they'd pick that up, and then that's wrong. So, so, it's not, times have changed a lot, you know, it's not just picking strawberries, put them in a punnet and sell it. It's good, I think it's changing for the good, sometimes it's a little frustrating of course, cause they give you two hours to provide that information. And if I'm on one of our other farms, you've got to come back, and you've got to produce all of that, if you don't produce it, they have the ability to shut you down.

K: Yeah. How many farms do you have? You have this one and then

R: we've got three farms, three commercial ones

K: where are the others?

R: only 10 minutes away, one of them, and then half an hour away. Sittingbourne is the other one. So, so three different commercial sites...

K: So you have non-commercial sites then as well or?

R: No, as in for us, the propagation sites, it's...EV, we've got Edward Vinson have got 12 propagation sites all dotted round everywhere. One in Bulgaria now, actually, because the climate is better there, for early season, so they can produce the strawberry plants quicker, because it's warmer, and then we ship them back. [pause]. So we're looking for the future, we're looking to get bigger, and better...hopefully we can achieve that...erm... you know we're doing something right Cause we're still here![both laugh. Get back into the car]

So I'm not sure what, what bits have we missed? Missed much yet, or...?



K: I don't think so. [gets sheet out].

R: You've got your list [laughs]

K: Yep [laughs]. it's actually covered really...so the questions were: tell me about your farm, the main ways in which your farm's changed, why they've happened, your background in farming, how do you see your farm developing in the future, so... I mean we've covered most of it I think.

R: We've covered most of that I think, yeah,... it's changed because varieties change as well, I mean the grow- the growing system as you've seen has changed, we're out of, we will be out of soil production, and that's the industry in general, we've gone from the soil to tabletops. Yes it's a big expense to set up a tabletop field but we expect that to last 10 years - hopefully - that system, Everyone's happier working at that height. For us, for instance, assuming the crop was the same, at the same stage, same, same yield, if we were in the soil we're paying about 1 pounds 30 to pick a 4 and a half kilo tray, on a tabletop, that's down to 80, 90 pence for the same tray. So for us, of course it's a huge saving. So, yes it's a lot of money to invest, but long term you're certainly going to get that back. We need to be doing that not only for us, but for, for our staff, because we don't want to get left behind to find staff to pick just strawberries out of the soil now, I can imagine would be very, very difficult. Quality is far better, by growing in a substrate you know what you're growing into, you, you can be ready for that, quality of the plant is better. Every year these new varieties come and they are getting better by design, like everything, like a car. So our variety's getting better, we seem to be learning how to grow into a substrate, it, it is more difficult, soil's very easy to grow into really, it's a bit more forgiving. If a substrate, as I say if you get that wrong, and if you don't irrigate that bag for one day, that bag will die and then suddenly you're 6 kilos of fruit less. And, you know we, so so, so we've got, we've got quite a dedicated irrigation team and they physically are walking the fields. So, but for us tabletop production is the future, it is the way to go, yes a big expense but you get your money back so long term if you look for one year or two years that it's cost you to install that, it would scare you. But then when you look long term that's when you start seeing the returns. Our staff are happier, they're earning a bit more money, our qualities of our berries are better, they're hanging, as you see they're not sitting in the mud like they used to, they're just hanging there waiting to go. So future, future for us is, is promising.

K: Yeah, so you're just going to keep doing what you're doing?

R: We're gonna keep going, we, we don't believe we can get a lot bigger, because...you need to know your limits, and I think we're pretty much maxed out now. We could, but we would have to invest in in our cold stores, our packhouse,



we're pretty much where we are and to get bigger on the farm, we would have to get bigger everywhere. We want to get a little bit bigger, you know we had a 3 year aim, a 3 year aim of 3000 tons in 3 years time.

K: Ok, three years from now is that?

R: Yeah... bit optimistic maybe, but doable. You know, with the right climate, with the right varieties, it's, it's doable. One or two more hectares we've put up, maybe. You know when, when you're averaging somewhere between 30 and 40 tons a hectare, you don't need that many more fields to reach that goal. But, to set a field up's gonna cost you 80,000 pounds a hectare. So, we would either like a little bit more price per kilo but of course that's dictated by the supermarkets, so we can't say to them well we want 3 pounds 50 a kilo. They'll say well ok we'll go and buy it from somewhere else then! [laughs]

K: Have they, yeah have their prices changed over the years or is that...

R: No, that's the problem. When you kook at what we do, our prices have, minimum wage goes up every year, it's gonna go up again in October, so, our prices do expand every year, the price per kilo remains the same. And, you know, you can sit with your supermarket board and you can say well hang on we've had to invest into this tabletop system to survive, we have to buy 300,000 pounds worth of coir from Sri Lanka every year to plant our strawberries into, yet you still give us 3 pounds a kilo. You know, our costs are getting higher but, but we're not getting anything back for that, but, but we have to do it to survive.

K: Do you think at some point, that will just be...unsustainable, you know if you keep increasing your costs, they keep....

R: I, I suspect, that's why I think...we're pretty much where we need to be now. We, we're alright, we can, you know we're doing ok, as we are, but, if prices don't increase - and they only need to increase a little bit a kilo -if they don't increase, then we will you know we will have to stay on the size we are, which is fine, maybe that's a good thing - but there's not a lot of money left at the end of the year. Supermarkets can be very funny people, if, if suddenly, there's a big crop, and everyone's picking far more than they expected, their sales drop off, because the weather turned - today for instance, everyone will have a barbeque today, so they'll walk in to Tescos, they'll buy their burgers, if they've got their selling right, they will have put the strawberries as they go in the door, so they'll see the strawberries, pick up the punnet of strawberries, think "oh we'll have them after our burgers". If it was raining today, no one would have a barbeque, no one would want to eat strawberries. So a lot of it, a lot of it, is certainly dependent on, on, on the weather, So, it pretty much starts to pick too much, then the price will drop, and we, and we



lose out a little bit, so it's very difficult. It's very, we are supermarket led, and that will never change, not now. Providing we can keep doing what we're doing, we believe every year we're getting a little bit better. We believe we're learning a little bit more, we aim to pick one kilo per plant - if we can average that, we'll be alright. Not going to break any records, but providing we can keep getting these guys come back every year. If in the event of these guys not wanting to come, I don't know what we'd do. Don't know. But strawberry production, raspberry production, blueberry production, it's all changed in, in since I've been here in 9 years, you know it was all in the soil it was very easy. Now it's all in substrate, a lot more harder to grow. We've, we've got to learn how to manage ourselves and the crop better. We need the support of these guys.

K: Did you have to change in the first place to this new tabletop and substrate because the demand from the supermarkets was higher so you needed to grow more?

R: Yes, yeah, we needed to produce more, we, we had to get bigger and this is the way to go. You won't see many farms now - soft fruit farms - that are not growing strawberries in, in this fashion. because it, it reduces our picking costs, the quality's better of, of the berry, so the whole picture is looking better. We just need the sales to continue. These sales, these two weeks, perfect Wimbledon, again it's in people's minds, for some reason, strawberries and cream at Wimbledon, so sales are terrific for Wimbledon, everyone eats strawberries because Wimbledon's on. But if we have a wet week, wet cloudy miserable week, no one's going to buy any soft fruit. And then either they won't take it, so we either have to store it, shelf life...Tesco's won't take a strawberry over three days old, so, it'll live in cold store for 4 or 5 days but of course quality is dropping every day, so then you have to regrade again and that's at a cost to us, so you're throwing more out because it's, it's deteriorating, you know, you, so it's, it's not easy. You know we've- from picking strawberry to cold store, has to be within an hour, we've got to get them from the field to the store within an hour.

K: is the store quite far from here?

R: no, it's only where, where we met, but of course we've got another farm in Sittingbourne, so it's straight on the lorry, straight here, you've got to get them cooled down to below 5 degrees within an hour or they start to lose - not noticeably - but they start to lose condition. It's alright if you're selling them straight away that's fine, but erm.... Er.... of course it's not, not always that easy. If sales drop off, we end up sitting on stock, it costs us money, supermarkets don't want it, inevitably then we have to sell what we produce to market, as in the London markets for instance, Covent Garden, etc, they pay half the price, a third of the price of what a supermarket would pay, but it's better than nothing. You've already picked it so you've already grown it, it's c- you've already had your cost. The only disadvantage



with selling to market is that then that brings the cost of the supermarket fruit down, because if, if the industry floods the open market, then the housewife will buy a punnet of strawberries for 1 pounds, instead of paying 2 pounds 50 in Tesco's so then your prices come down because there's too much fruit on the market, like everything, you know, supply and demand, and if we flood the market, the industry price is gonna drop. So, should you sell to just the open market? Sometimes probably not, you're probably better off saying nope, I'm not gonna sell mine for 20 tonnes a surplus to the open market, because that's gonna drop my supermarket cost. We're better off to send this for juice, cut our losses but still get a good price from the supermarket. So its, it's not, it's not easy.

K: No... there's a lot of, sort of I suppose of calculatedness to it...

R: Yes, yeah. Anyway, I'll grab you some strawberries.

K: Ahh, thank you.

[Audio ends] Richard and I go and pick some strawberries, he shows me the fruit bins full of "waste" strawberries, and then we make our way back to the office.